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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000376

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LE IR MU

SUBJECT: OMANI SUPPORT FOR ARAB LEAGUE EFFORTS TO RESOLVE
LEBANON CRISIS

REF: STATE 52061

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Secretary General of the Omani Foreign Ministry told the Ambassador on May 18 that Oman firmly supported ongoing Arab League efforts to help mediate an agreement among the various factions to end the crisis in Lebanon. While acknowledging the need for Hizballah to pledge to refrain from violence, he asserted that talk of disarming Hizballah was "not practical" at the present time. Oman rejected the labeling of Hizballah as a terrorist organization and advised that it be engaged as a legitimate Lebanese political entity, especially before the next parliamentary elections, which could strengthen Hizballah's position. The Omani government did not believe that any Arab country, or the Arab League, had formally discussed the Lebanese crisis with Iran. If the Arab League were to broker a deal, however, it would need to approach Tehran and other regional parties to help ensure compliance. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met on May 18 with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Secretary General Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi to deliver reftel demarche and to discuss Oman's perspective on the crisis in Lebanon. Sayyid Badr confirmed that Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi, with whom he had talked prior to the Minister's departure, had traveled to Beirut and then on to Doha as part of the Arab League (AL) delegation charged with trying to mediate a resolution to the Lebanese crisis. Sayyid Badr stated that Oman strongly supported the AL's efforts on Lebanon and hoped that all Lebanese factions, including Hizballah, would agree on a peaceful way forward to include a plan for both presidential and parliamentary elections. Failure to reach such an agreement, Sayyid Badr opined, could be "disastrous" and possibly re-ignite a civil war in Lebanon.

¶3. (C) While recognizing the importance of getting Hizballah, as well as other Lebanese groups, to pledge not to use weapons inside Lebanon against Lebanese to further its agenda, Sayyid Badr asserted that it was "not practical" at this time to talk about disarming Hizballah as there were more pressing issues that demanded attention. Moreover, factors outside of Lebanon's internal conflict, e.g., Israel, had a significant bearing on the Hizballah arms question. Sayyid Badr acknowledged, however, that Hizballah was acting as a "state within a state," which he agreed was unacceptable. He continued that Oman hoped that achievement of an agreement in Doha would convince Hizballah that it could effectively promote its interests through the political process, rather than through the use of arms.

¶4. (C) Asked if Oman would consider declaring Hizballah a terrorist organization, Sayyid Badr said that the Omani government "profoundly disagreed" with the U.S. on this point. Although Hizballah was an armed group, it had legitimate claims and interests, he stated. Refusing to deal with Hizballah or labeling it as a terrorist group was counter-productive. Instead, Hizballah must be treated as a "significant political entity" in Lebanon. Sayyid Badr

further explained that labeling and ostracizing Hizballah ignores a fundamental fact of Lebanese politics; engaging it in the political process and dialogue was the preferred approach.

¶5. (C) Sayyid Badr claimed that Hizballah might achieve "significant success" in the next Lebanese parliamentary elections. Consequently, getting Hizballah to commit to an agreement now before it gained more political clout was "critical." If Hizballah were to achieve a majority in parliament, he stated, there would then be "no hope" for it to make any concessions. To further prospects for an agreement, Oman would not issue a statement that might prejudice the "Doha dialogue."

¶6. (C) The Secretary General did not attempt to discount Hizballah's use of and support for terrorist activities cited by the Ambassador. But he declared that given the complexity of the situation in Lebanon, it was too "simplistic" to label and dismiss Hizballah leaders as terrorists. He urged the U.S. to recognize Hizballah as a valid political entity in Lebanon and to deal with it accordingly. In response, the Ambassador reiterated that if Hizballah wanted to be treated as a legitimate political entity by the U.S. and others, it must repudiate the use of violence and disarm.

¶7. (C) According to Sayyid Badr, Oman had not engaged in discussions with either Iran or Syria on Lebanon. He added that he did not think that anyone, including the Arab League, had talked to Tehran on the subject. Sayyid Badr hoped that this would continue to be the case as he did not believe it would be "useful" to bring Iran into the process now.

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However, if the AL succeeded in brokering a deal, it would need to explain to all parties and regional countries - including Iran - the importance of supporting and maintaining such an agreement, and how efforts to derail it could impact both Arab-Arab and Arab-Persian relations.

¶8. (C) Sayyid Badr cautioned against assuming that Syria was trying to torpedo an agreement between the Lebanese factions. In response, the Ambassador countered that both Syria and Iran have much different interests than Lebanon and that it would be naive to think that these states were not looking at ways to advance their own priorities at the expense of the Lebanese people. Sayyid Badr did not disagree.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Avoiding further violence and restoring political order appear to be Oman's priorities in Lebanon, even if that means accepting a greater role for Hizballah. The Omanis do not see the risk of an empowered Hizballah in Lebanon that most of their Arab partners and we do. Judging from the Secretary General's comments, Hizballah's rise is inevitable. END COMMENT.

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